GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

STATEMENT

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Remarks by Premier Wheatley at the Opening Ceremony of the 2026 Agriculture and Fisheries Exhibition and Market

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Ladies and gentlemen, farmers and fishers, exhibitors, students, and all who continue to nourish this territory with your hands, your knowledge, and your dedication – good afternoon.

It is a pleasure to join you for the opening ceremony of the 2026 Agriculture and Fisheries Exhibition and Market. This year's theme, ***"Farming the Land, Fishing the Seas, Nourishing Lives and Legacies,"*** speaks directly to who we are as Virgin Islanders. It reminds us that the work of producing food is not only an economic activity – it is a cultural inheritance, a source of pride, and a foundation for our resilience as a people.

Over the next two days, we will witness the remarkable quality and variety of food crops, poultry, livestock, and fisheries products that are being produced right here in The Virgin Islands. These displays are more than exhibits; they are evidence of our capability, our creativity, and our potential to feed ourselves.

This focus is timely. Around the world and across our region, nations are once again confronting the urgent questions of food supply, food prices, and food security. Global shocks – from conflicts to climate impacts - have reminded us how vulnerable imported food systems can be. Many countries are now working to reduce their reliance on imports and strengthen their capacity to provide for their own people.

Here in The Virgin Islands, we have walked this path before. Agriculture and fishing were once central pillars of our society and our economy. Our fore-parents cultivated the land, reared their own livestock, and fished the seas with skill and purpose. They traded with neighbouring islands and sustained their families through hard work and ingenuity. This exhibition and market remind us that the same spirit, the same capability, still lives within us. We have, within our shores and within our waters, the ability to produce food that can nourish our people, supply our restaurants, and reduce our dependence on imports.

Rest assured that my government remains committed to supporting the farming and fishing sector and strengthening our food security. Lands have been allocated at Paraquita Bay for farming. Work continues to advance the Agriculture and

Fisheries Complex and the reservoir that will support Paraquita Bay farmers. The project to build a fit-for-purpose Fisheries Landing Site at the Omar Wallace Hodge Fishermen's Wharf and Park is progressing through the design phase. And Cabinet has approved an Agriculture and Fisheries Grant Policy and Grant Programme to empower farmers and fishers – making it easier to access the tools, equipment, infrastructure, and resources needed to grow and bring food to market. From gardening tools and fishing nets to access roads, boats, and animal pens, these grants are designed to strengthen production and expand opportunity.

I am now pleased to announce that we received a total of one hundred and forty-three (143) applications under this programme. Following a thorough review process conducted by the committee approved by cabinet, eighteen (18) farmers and seventeen (17) fishers have been approved as awardees in this first round. The 35 approved farmers and fishers will receive a total of three hundred and eighty-eight thousand, eight hundred and twenty-six dollars and sixty-six cents. ($388,826.66). And that's just a portion of the $500,000 we project to invest in this programme this year alone.

I take this opportunity to warmly congratulate all of our awardees, who represent the strength, resilience, and future of agriculture and fisheries in our territory. Their names will be officially published, and each will be contacted directly.

To ensure transparency and proper use of funds, payments will be made directly to the vendors identified within the approved applications.

But building our local food production sector can only happen if we make it a national priority. While we in the government do our part, our farmers and fishers need your support. I encourage families, restaurants, and businesses across the Territory to buy local and eat local. When you support local food producers, you strengthen our economy, you reduce our vulnerability, and you help preserve the traditions that have shaped our identity. And more importantly, when you support local farmers and fishers, you are helping to transform their efforts into viable commercial enterprises.

Speaking of transformations, the very branding of this week has moved from Farmers' Week in the 90s to Agriculture and Fisheries Exhibition and Market,

names better in keeping with the progression of the sector. The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Agriculture and Fisheries Management Unit within the Premier’s Office must be commended for their attention to every detail and the duty, care, and passion they display.

Equally important, I want to thank two members of my government, Honourable Dr Karl Dawson and Honourable Stacy Mather, as they have both embraced the government’s mandate to advance the cause of agriculture and food production in The Virgin Islands. The particular focus of both members of my government represents the seriousness with which I approach this important subject. I think that this opening ceremony is a beautiful event…from the harvest march to the poems, songs, and honourees to the recitations…everything has been absolutely magnificent. What we had here today has the potential to inspire not just the people of The Virgin Islands, but the youth.

I encourage everyone to explore the Exhibition and Market over the next two days. Learn more about how food is grown, harvested, and brought to your table. Meet the men and women who are working every day to build a stronger, more sustainable food system for The Virgin Islands.

Together, let us continue to farm the land, fish the seas, and nourish the lives and legacies of our people.

Thank you, and I wish everyone a productive and inspiring Exhibition and Market.

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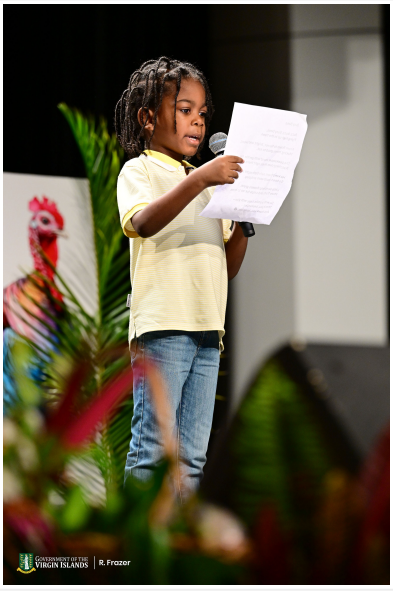
























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